

The NAXOS logo is a blue square with the word "NAXOS" in white, serif, all-caps font. Above the text is a small graphic of a classical building facade with columns.

NAXOS

THE FRENCH IN SPAIN

**DEBUSSY
IBERT
RAVEL**

**Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra
JoAnn Falletta**

The French in Spain

As France and Spain are neighbours, it may seem surprising that Spain was a source of exoticism for French composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. But it is the specifically local aspects of Spain that most appealed to the French, whether that be Spanish dances, instruments such as the guitar, or the Moorish and gypsy heritage of Andalusia. We must also be clear that, to a large extent, this exoticised Spain was a country of the imagination: French composers were often inspired by literature or other works of art connected to Spain rather than the actual location. For instance, Washington Irving's story collection *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) put Granada on the map for writers, artists and composers well beyond Spain. It is not an exaggeration to state that Irving was the source for much subsequent art inspired by the Alhambra: the quintessentially Moorish Spanish palace was mediated by an American author.

One of the main draws of the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris was the theme-park-like *Andalousie au temps des Maures* ('Andalusia in the time of the Moors'). It included a recreation of the Patio of the Lions from the Alhambra and a master of ceremonies in the guise of King Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Andalusia, while its entertainment programme featured Spanish regional dances and gypsies from Granada dancing the flamenco. The exhibit's hybrid of medievalism, represented by the Moors and their Christian counterparts, and contemporary exoticism, as represented by North Africans and gypsies, strongly appealed to a Paris audience that already had an appetite for exoticism.

After the 1900 Exposition, Debussy composed a series of works associated with Granada, exhibiting what the distinguished Debussy scholar François Lesure termed 'the Alhambra cult'. Spanish-style entertainment also came to the Paris music hall in the form of toned-down flamenco shows or similar dances, or hybrid French popular *chansons* in Hispanic style. As far as classical music culture was concerned, the composer and pianist Isaac Albéniz was a key figure in introducing Parisian audiences to Spanish music: both Debussy and Ravel attended an Albéniz recital at the Salle Érard in Paris in April 1889.

Certain topics recur again and again in Spanish-influenced French music. Works inspired by nocturnal environments, perfumes and carnival processions show that for the French, their imagined Spain was a country for relaxation and pleasure. And instrumental sounds associated with Spain include, of course, castanets and the guitar. As the acoustic guitar is a quiet, intimate instrument with no regular role in the symphony orchestra, composers instead imitated its sound: indeed, at the start of the third section of *Ibéria*, Debussy states that the violins should be held across the body, as if in guitar position, and strummed.

Debussy's fascination with Spain, a country he visited only briefly, is shown in *Ibéria*, the central and longest section of his orchestral *Images*. As a young man, the composer travelled as far afield as Russia, where he was the house pianist for Tchaikovsky's patron Nadezhda von Meck, but the older Debussy hated being away from home and preferred to journey in his imagination. *Ibéria* is itself divided into three movements. The first movement, *Par les rues et par les chemins* is a vibrant evocation of a lively outdoor scene, while the second, *Les Parfums de la nuit*, is sultry and enervating. There is a magical moment at the end of this section where languorous chords are progressively interrupted by livelier material, as if a procession is approaching from a distance. This interruption gradually takes over and turns into the final movement, *Le Matin d'un jour de fête*. Strumming and percussive sounds are prominent here, as is good humour: at one point, an over-enthusiastic, possibly drunk violinist starts a solo, only to be laughed at by the rest of the orchestra. Castanets and tambourines add local colour, as do the inventive, danceable Spanish rhythms.

Ravel had a slightly more direct connection to Spain than Debussy, having been born in Ciboure, only six miles from the Spanish border. His beloved mother was Basque and he was always proud of his Basque heritage, though his musical evocations of Spain draw on different real and imaginary landscapes. *Alborada del gracioso* ('Dawn Song of the Jester') was originally composed for piano as the fourth piece of his *Miroirs* suite, and it is dedicated to Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, a music critic and fellow member of the Apaches, a group of male contemporary music and art enthusiasts active in Paris in the first decade of the 20th century.

Alborada del gracioso is an idealised witty dance that irresistibly evokes foot stamping and castanets. Its outer sections capture the strumming, castanet-driven excitement of Spanish rhythms, while the more reflective melodic central part is an alba (medieval dawn song) reimagined in the early 20th century. This orchestral version of *Alborada del gracioso* was commissioned for a Sergey Diaghilev ballet project, *Les Jardins d'Aranjuez* ('The Gardens of Aranjuez'), where it was heard alongside Fauré's *Pavane* and Ravel's orchestration of Chabrier's *Menuet pompeux*. This composite work was premiered at the Alhambra – that is, the Alhambra Theatre in London's Leicester Square – on 18 July 1919. In his orchestration, Ravel transforms the pianist's virtuosity into something equally challenging, especially for the triple-tonguing trumpet and flute, and he subdivides the strings into as many as 24 parts. For Ravel, Spanish style could be nostalgic, evocative, playful or virtuosic, sometimes – as in *Alborada del gracioso* – all in the same piece.

Jacques Ibert had an even more direct connection with Spain, as his mother was a cousin of the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, a close friend of Ravel. Ibert composed *Escales* ('Ports of Call') in Rome in 1922, inspired in part by a honeymoon cruise taken by him and his wife Rose-Marie in 1921. After the sea voyage, they moved to Rome: Ibert had won the most prestigious composition competition of the Paris Conservatoire, the Prix de Rome, in 1919 and the prize involved him taking up residence at the Villa Medici in the Italian capital. The three movements take us on a Mediterranean journey from the Italian mainland to Sicily to Tunisia and finally the Spanish coast: they are titled *Rome-Palermo*, *Tunis-Nefta* and *Valencia*.

After a calm, Debussyesque opening with sinuous woodwind solos, perhaps suggesting daybreak, the tempo quickens as the journey takes us to Palermo in Sicily, evoked through the dynamism of its tarantella rhythm. The Tunisian-themed short central movement uses tropes that listeners in Ibert's time would have recognised as exotic, including a quasi-Arabic oboe solo with characteristic augmented seconds accompanied by a repeating drum beat. Its fluid metre also contributes to the North African flavour. The energy increases again for *Valencia*, which captures the liveliness and fun of an outdoor Spanish festival.

Incidentally, while in Spain, Ibert and his wife visited Falla, who encouraged him as a composer. *Escales* was premiered in January 1924 by the Orchestre Lamoureux conducted by Paul Paray and was immediately successful. His publisher added the place labels for each movement to the score, presumably with Ibert's approval.

We return to Ravel for *Rapsodie espagnole*, a four-movement suite inspired by different Spanish dance forms and imaginary locations. Its first movement, *Prélude à la nuit*, is another nocturnal evocation; it has an insistent four-note repeating figure, a descending motif that recurs elsewhere in the suite and is characteristic of much Spanish music. The second and third movements are based on Spanish dance forms: *Malagueña* features castanets and evokes the flamenco, and *Habanera* (originally composed in 1895 for two pianos) alternates major and minor modes. The finale is a festive carnival that can be paralleled with the last movement of Debussy's *Ibéria*, though it must be remembered that Ravel's piece predates Debussy's. Spanish dances and landscapes continued to inspire Ravel, most notoriously in *Boléro*, which takes the insistent repeated rhythm trope to an extreme point.

The Andalusia and the Moors exhibit at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, the arrival of Spanish painters, and the vogue for Hispanic song and dance styles in popular culture all contributed to the melting pot that was Paris in the early 20th century. This album gives a snapshot of the considerable impact of Spanish music on French composers, and significantly this was a reciprocal relationship: Spanish composers including Falla, Federico Mompou and Joaquín Rodrigo lived in Paris and looked to their French counterparts for influence.

Caroline Potter

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra



Founded in 1935, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) is Buffalo's leading cultural ambassador, presenting more than 120 classics, pops and youth concerts each year. Since 1940, the orchestra's permanent home has been Kleinhans Music Hall. In 2022, it made its 25th appearance at Carnegie Hall, celebrating the life and works of former BPO music director Lukas Foss. Over the decades, the BPO has matured in stature under leading conductors William Steinberg, Josef Krips, Lukas Foss, Michael Tilson Thomas, Julius Rudel, Semyon Bychkov and Maximiano Valdés. During the tenure of JoAnn Falletta, the BPO has rekindled its distinguished history of radio broadcasts and recordings, including the release of over 60 albums of diverse repertoire on the Naxos and Beau Fleuve Records labels. The Philharmonic's recording of John Corigliano's *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (Naxos 8.559331), featuring soprano Hila Plitmann, received GRAMMY Awards for Best Classical Vocal Performance and Best Classical Contemporary Composition, and its recording of Richard Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua* (Naxos 8.559885-86) with the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus received a GRAMMY Award for Best Choral Performance. www.bpo.org

JoAnn Falletta



Photo: Heather Bellini

Multiple GRAMMY-winning conductor JoAnn Falletta serves as music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) and music director laureate of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. She has guest-conducted many of the most prominent orchestras in America, Canada, Europe, Asia and South America. As music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, Falletta became the first woman to lead a major American orchestra. Her discography includes over 135 titles, and she is a leading recording artist for Naxos. Her GRAMMY-winning Naxos recordings include Richard Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua* (8.559885-86) and John Corigliano's *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (8.559331), both with the BPO, and Kenneth Fuchs' *Spiritualist* with the London Symphony Orchestra (8.559824). Falletta and the BPO have also received GRAMMY nominations for releases featuring the works of Kodály and Foss in 2025, and Scriabin in 2024. Falletta is a member of the esteemed American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has served as a member of the National Council on the Arts, is the recipient of many of the most prestigious conducting awards and was named *Performance Today's* Classical Woman of the Year and one of the 50 great conductors of all time by *Gramophone* magazine. www.joannfalletta.com

This album presents orchestral works by three French composers who saw Spain as a paradise of warmth, fragrance and colour, whether real or imagined. From the vivid evocations of Debussy's *Images* and Ibert's *Escales*, to the dances and landscapes that inspired Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, these masterpieces of Impressionism show the considerable impact Spanish culture had on French composers in the early 20th century.

THE FRENCH IN SPAIN

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Images – No. 2. Ibéria

(1905–08) **19:37**

- 1** I. Par les rues
et par les chemins – **6:44**
- 2** II. Les Parfums de la nuit – **8:15**
- 3** III. Le Matin d'un jour de fête **4:38**

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

- 4** **Alborada del gracioso**
(1918) **7:52**

Jacques Ibert (1890–1962)

Escales (1922) **14:41**

- 5** I. Rome-Palermo – **6:54**
- 6** II. Tunis-Nefta – **2:24**
- 7** III. Valencia **5:23**

Maurice Ravel

Rapsodie espagnole
(1907–08) **15:03**

- 8** I. Prélude à la nuit – **4:15**
- 9** II. Malagueña **2:00**
- 10** III. Habanera **2:32**
- 11** IV. Feria **6:16**

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra
JoAnn Falletta

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